

2 February 1987

U.S. Journalist Is Held by Iran; Reason Unclear

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Special to The New York Times

ROME, Feb. 1 — An American journalist has been detained in Iran, the Swiss Foreign Ministry said today.

The journalist, Gerald F. Seib, the Middle East correspondent for The Wall Street Journal, had spent 10 days in Iran at the invitation of the Government before a group of men seized him outside his hotel in Teheran Saturday evening. His whereabouts today were unknown.

A diplomat from the Swiss Embassy who was accompanying the journalist was also detained briefly but was later released, according to a Swiss Foreign Ministry spokesman.

Iran Says Spy Posed as Journalist

Mr. Seib sought consular help from the Swiss Embassy, which represents American interests in Iran, after immigration authorities impounded his passport Thursday as he made plans to depart.

Shortly after his detention, the Iranian press agency reported that a "spy of the Zionist regime" posing as a journalist had been arrested after entering Iran on a false passport. But the agency did not state his name or nationality.

Mr. Seib was not specifically accused of anything when he was taken away, according to diplomats in Teheran.

In New York today, Norman Pearlstine, the managing editor of The Wall Street Journal, said: "Jerry Seib is a highly respected foreign correspondent and there can be no basis for the detention. We are seeking explanations through Iranian and other diplomatic channels. We hope any confusion will be cleared up and we are requesting

his immediate release from detention and from Iran.

"Jerry Seib entered Iran legally on a valid U.S. passport and is obviously a well-known and well-respected journalist," Mr. Pearlstine continued. "We see no reason to link Mr. Seib's detention with the Iranian news agency report."

The State Department issued a statement in Washington urging that Mr. Seib "be released immediately and allowed to depart forthwith." The statement also said that "from official diplomatic sources, we do not know why he has been detained."

Protest Is Planned

In Bern, a Swiss Foreign Ministry spokesman said the Swiss Ambassador in Teheran planned to protest the detention of Mr. Seib and of Thomas Furglester, the Swiss diplomat who was with Mr. Seib.

The United States has had no diplomatic representation in Teheran since the United States Embassy there was stormed on Nov. 4, 1979, and its staff held hostage for 444 days.

Mr. Seib was one of more than 100 journalists from around the world invited to visit Iran in recent weeks. He had participated last week in a Government-escorted tour of the battlefield in the Iran-Iraq war.

Mr. Seib, a 30-year-old native of Kansas, has been a reporter for The Wall Street Journal since 1978. He and his wife, Barbara Rosewicz, have been based in Cairo for The Journal since 1985. Although Mr. Seib had traveled extensively throughout the Middle East, this was his first trip to Iran.

Several Iranian men, who refused to identify themselves, seized Mr. Seib and Mr. Furglester as they were leaving Mr. Seib's hotel at about 6 P.M. Saturday, according to the diplomats in Teheran. After about half an hour the men released Mr. Furglester and returned him to the hotel, they said.

Some of the diplomats speculated that Mr. Seib's detention might reflect disagreements within the Iranian Government over the invitation extended to foreign journalists, including more than a dozen Americans, to publicize Iran's recent battlefield victories against Iraq.

Visa Was Extended

Like most of the other journalists, Mr. Seib was issued a five-day visa. But officials of the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, which supervised the visit, told the journalists their visas would be extended so they might tour the front and attend a news conference.

Of the visiting reporters left in Iran, all but Mr. Seib were given their passports back, with the extension, on Thursday evening. Mr. Seib, however, received several phone calls Thursday afternoon and evening from a man who said there was a minor difficulty with the journalist's passport.

The man said there had been a case of mistaken identity because Mr. Seib's name resembled that of a man sought by the authorities. The caller finally said the problem had been resolved and his passport would be returned.

The same account of Mr. Seib's difficulties was given by officials of both the Guidance and Foreign Ministries. Cancelling plans to leave Iran early

Some see the case as a product of factional strife.

Friday, Mr. Seib waited for his passport. He was eventually told to go to the immigration office Saturday morning because Friday was the Moslem day of worship.

On Saturday Mr. Seib, accompanied by Mr. Furglester and three other American correspondents, including this reporter, went to the Guidance Ministry press office. Senior officials refused to receive them.

At the immigration office Mr. Seib was told to wait because his passport could not be found, and the officials there told the Swiss diplomat to go away. After waiting almost two hours, Mr. Seib left with Mr. Furglester and they went to the diplomat's home.

Who Sought Him? 'Nobody'

That afternoon several men appeared at Mr. Seib's hotel and began making inquiries. They asked this correspondent where Mr. Seib could be found. When asked who they were, the Iranian translating the conversation said "nobody."

Mr. Seib returned to the hotel in the company of Mr. Furglester about 5:30 P.M., saying he would wait in his room. The hotel employees, however, said they could not find the key, so Mr. Seib decided to leave the hotel.

As he and Mr. Furglester were walking to the diplomat's car, they were seized. The three remaining American reporters, who had extended their stay to show support for Mr. Seib, left Teheran shortly afterward, having been warned that they might face possible unpleasantness because their visas had expired.